



THE GREAT 1927 FLOOD

Bob Kerr vividly recalled the awesome 1927 flood, which revolutionized U.S. water resources policy:

"The spring night was quaking with ominous sounds. Thunder exploded and boomed over the valley. A driving rain hammered impatiently on roofs and windows and dripped from eaves. There were hoarse shouts of men and frightened cries of children and animals. But most terrifying of all was the roar of the river. It was like no other earthly sound except perhaps that of a stampeding herd of buffalo.

"Vivid flashes of lightning lit the black night. Several hundred men, women, and children, driving livestock before them, were fleeing from the river bend town of Hickman, Kentucky. Here was a tousled boy crying as he pulled a reluctant calf. There a car had broken down and a woman stared at it with frantic indecision while her three small daughters tugged at her skirt. A wagon piled high with furniture creaked along pulled by mules. An old man hobbled by with a cane.

"Close by the river a thousand men toiled along a ten-mile stretch. Here the sloping levee built to hold the Mississippi River from the lowlands towered above fields of corn stubble. Guards paced back and forth watching anxiously for danger signals: water seeping through, or 'sand boils.'

"... At sight of one of these, a guard would shout hoarsely and wave a flare. Others would whip up the mules and bring sandbags to throw against the

threatened spot. All this in a drenching downpour.

"The time was April 15, 1927, the year of the Great Flood . . .

"Floods coursed, reckless and muddy, through all the channels that fed into the Mississippi. On the Arkansas River, which drops with sudden great jumps and then slopes gradually, the tail of the flood caught up with the head. The flood level was the highest in ninety-nine years . . .

"The immense force of the river was too much. On April 16, the Dorena levee (at Hickman) broke and a tremendous wall of water crashed through with a roar that could be heard for miles . . . The next day, St. John's levee a few miles downstream on the Mississippi cracked. The river was swirling past Memphis now at two million cubic feet a second . . . Down the course of the turbulent river, the levees fell apart.

"Two-fifths of the United States' lowlands were flooded or threatened. The Mississippi Valley was itself a vast reservoir. A yellow sea stretched a thousand miles from Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico and was fifty to 150 miles wide. Seven- hundred thousand people were driven from their homes . . .

"On April 22, New Orleans was in a panic. The flood was rushing upon it now at more than three million cubic feet a second. A tough decision was made. A levee fifteen miles north of New Orleans was dynamited to divert water from the city. This man-made flood drove hundreds . . . from their farms . . . " ⁹